

# Winning with Certification

The Marine Stewardship Council is making progress in addressing the issues of certification of small-scale and developing-country fisheries

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) was established to harness concern at the state of fisheries resources, as a mechanism to reward and encourage responsible fishing practices. Since the organization was established about ten years ago, the interest in fishery certification and ecolabelling as a conservation and economic tool has grown significantly. Seventy-two fisheries have been certified to the MSC standard, thousands of tonnes of seafood of over 60 different species are eligible to use the MSC seafood ecolabel, and an increasing number

practices in small-scale and developing-country fisheries to be rewarded in the marketplace can play an important role in ensuring the continuing viability of these resources and the long-term sustenance of the livelihoods that are dependent on them. Working with these fisheries remains an integral component of the MSC programme.

The number of developing-country fisheries and small-scale fisheries in both developing and developed countries that are formally in the MSC programme, now numbering well over 30 fisheries, is on the rise, following what was a more measured level of uptake in the early days of the MSC.

There are a range of factors that account, to some extent, for the initial low levels of participation of developing-country and small-scale fisheries in the MSC. Some of these relate to an initial disinclination to engage in ecolabelling due to the more broadly held concerns about its possible effect on international trade. With time, it has become clearer that with an ecolabel and certification programme that is operated credibly and transparently and consistent with relevant internationally agreed frameworks, there can be very significant ecological, economic and social benefits for developing-country fisheries.

## Consumer preferences

Another factor is likely related to the seafood preferences amongst the developed countries' retailers and individuals who generally tend to be typical, early adopters of 'green', ecolabelled products. The seafood preferences of the early

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of retail organizations worldwide have formalized their commitment to source seafood caught in a sustainable manner. These developments reflect the increased consciousness of the individual and collective responsibility, and of the many opportunities that exist, to reduce the impact of fishing activity on the natural environment.

Developing-country fisheries are a source of two-thirds of the world's fish production and account for half of the world trade in seafood. Small-scale fisheries directly support the livelihoods of well over 95 per cent of the world's fishers, the majority of whom are in developing countries. Mechanisms which allow good

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adopters of ecolabelled products had implications for the type of seafood, and, consequently, the geographic origin of fish for which there was an initial incentive to bear the MSC label on product. With the practice of sustainable seafood purchase becoming less niche, the interest in ecolabelled seafood has grown beyond the initial focus on the more temperate, white-fleshed species which were favoured by consumers in early-adopter countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, and the United States and has shifted towards much broader and more mainstream range of species types from more diverse geographic origins.

There are other factors that have likely constrained a higher level of participation from developing-country fisheries. These include issues such as limited availability of the scientific data which is needed as evidence of sustainability; the cost of certification, which includes both the cost of auditing and cost of making improvements in the fishery to meet requirements of the standard; limited availability of local auditing capacity in some parts of the world; and paucity of formal or informal management measures and infrastructure in some fisheries. These are features that are common, although by no means exclusive, to developing-country fisheries and which need to be factored into any efforts to facilitate participation of these fisheries in ecolabelling.

The last few years have seen a range of developments within and external to the MSC which are addressing these issues. These developments have contributed to ensuring that more developing-country fisheries are able to participate in, and benefit from, certification. They include work by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to develop and adopt international fisheries ecolabelling guidelines and by the MSC to develop an assessment approach for data-limited fisheries. Other significant developments are the many multi-stakeholder partnerships that are being developed between fisheries, non-



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governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector and governmental organizations to support and provide capacity to fisheries using the MSC assessment process as a framework. It also includes the ongoing efforts to increase awareness amongst stakeholders of the role and use of ecolabelling as a conservation and value-added marketing tool. Some of the key organizations developing partnerships to assist fisheries through the MSC process include the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership (SFP).

The FAO guidelines for the ecolabelling of fish and fishery products from marine capture fisheries provide an international framework for the operation of fisheries ecolabelling schemes, and the adoption, in 2005, of the guidelines by the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) represented an important milestone in the unfolding narrative of seafood ecolabelling.

### Chain of custody

Key features of the guidelines are the provisions on institutional and procedural requirements for accreditation, certification, standard setting, chain of custody and conflict-resolution procedures and the minimum substantive requirements and criteria. The FAO guidelines are intended to be a voluntary policy tool.

They, however, provide the global framework which is needed to ensure that ecolabelling programmes are implemented in a manner that is not detrimental to developing-country fisheries and ensures that concerns raised by developing countries are addressed.

A key attribute of the FAO guidelines is that they reinforce the importance of transparency, independence and openness to ensuring that all fishery types, and,

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particularly, developing-country fisheries, are able to access and benefit from ecolabelling schemes. The MSC programme has a number of key features that ensure it is consistent with the FAO guidelines. These include third-party, evidence-based assessment of fisheries; transparent processes with built-in stakeholder consultation; and a fishery standard based on the three key components of the FAO minimum substantive requirements and criteria for ecolabelling (sustainability of target species, ecosystems and management practices).

The FAO guidelines recognize some of the constraints that developing-country fisheries may encounter, and, amongst other measures, call for financial and technical support from States, NGOs and financial institutions to developing-country fisheries that may be interested in certification. On the issue of limited availability of data, the FAO guidelines highlight the need for assessments to be appropriate to the fishery being assessed, stating that the use of a less elaborate approach in a fishery should not preclude certification. It specifically notes that precautionary approaches may necessitate lower levels of utilization when there is greater uncertainty. During the 2009 COFI meeting, FAO mandated the secretariat with a task

of identifying methods for assessing data-deficient fisheries that would facilitate their certification. This is an aspect that the MSC had identified as an issue for developing-country fisheries and, prior to this development within the FAO, had commenced work to develop a risk-based approach for use in assessments of data-deficient fisheries.

The MSC process recognizes that the approach to managing fisheries varies from one fishery to another. Management approaches range from the more sophisticated, data-intensive, complex systems characteristic of some types of high-value, highly intensive, developed-country fisheries to the less complex, less data-intensive, often more informal management arrangements, common, but not exclusive, to smaller-scale, low-intensity, developing-country fisheries. These differences need to be factored into assessments against the standard. Nonetheless, the absence of quantitative evidence of ecological status in fisheries could indeed affect the ability of a fishery to become certified to the MSC assessment. This is because in addition to evidence that a fishery is using responsible fishing practices, the requirement for transparency in certification and ecolabelling programmes means that a certified fishery needs to have objective evidence that the desired sustainability outcomes for target stock and ecosystem health are being met.

In recognition of the fact that some developing-country and small-scale fisheries may be operating sustainably but may not have the complex scientific data required to demonstrate the sustainable outcome resulting from their actions, MSC commenced work to develop a methodological approach to be used in assessments when data-deficient situations are encountered.

### **Integrated framework**

Following a period of development, testing and review, the MSC Technical Advisory Board, in June 2009, approved the final version of the Fisheries Assessment Methodology (FAM), which included an integrated Risk Based Framework. The Risk

Based Framework is an integral part of the MSC's assessment methodology, which is triggered when a data-deficient situation is encountered in a fishery being assessed against the MSC standard.

The Risk Based Framework involves a qualitative or semi-quantitative evaluation of proxies for scale, intensity, susceptibility and productivity. The method uses these proxies to determine risk values for fisheries being assessed against the MSC standard. These risk values, in turn, provide a measure of the impact of the fishery against specific MSC performance indicators that would normally require detailed scientific data for their evaluation. The procedure requires a robust stakeholder input which, in addition to the embedded precautionary approach to scoring, ensures the outcomes of the assessments remain robust and credible.

The aim of the risk-based approach is to provide small-scale and data-deficient fisheries with a viable route to certification against the MSC's standard, while maintaining the scientific robustness that is characteristic of the MSC programme. The newly adopted approach is currently being used in the assessments of several small-scale and developing-country fisheries, including the Maldives pole-and-line and handline tuna fishery, the Sian Ka'an and Banco Chinchorro lobster fishery in Mexico, the Suriname Atlantic seabob fishery, and the Cornish sardine fishery in the UK.

Successful implementation of a fisheries certification scheme requires extensive engagement from a broad range of fisheries stakeholders. This is essential to ensuring that stakeholders have awareness of the MSC programme and have the capacity to initiate and participate in the certification process in a fishery.

To develop this capacity, the MSC has worked with partner organizations in various countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa to increase awareness on the issue of fisheries certification and ecolabelling. They

include WWF, which has been a key actor with many developing-country and small-scale fisheries, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Blue Ventures, Coral Reef Degradation in the Indian Ocean (CORDIO) in Africa, CeDePesca in Latin America, and SFP in Asia. The work undertaken with partner organizations has included providing training on the MSC assessment processes and facilitating development of partnerships that can support fisheries efforts to become certified. These efforts have led to opportunities for fishers and other stakeholders to identify fisheries that could benefit from certification, some of which have now partnered with other organizations to initiate early stages of the assessment process.

In order to build on its work with partners in developing countries, the MSC recently increased its on-the-ground capacity in the southern African region by opening an office in Cape Town, South Africa. This has enabled an increase in MSC's capacity to work with fisheries

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stakeholders in South Africa, Namibia, Tanzania, Kenya and Mozambique, with the result that a number of fisheries, including a lobster fishery in Kenya, an octopus fishery in Tanzania and an albacore tuna fishery in South Africa, have taken initial steps to formal participation in the MSC programme.

Certification to the MSC standard provides a credible and measurable confirmation of a fishery's sustainability. The value of fishery certification, in this context, has led to the use of the MSC programme as a framework within which stakeholder partnerships are formed around specific fisheries, and a programme of work undertaken to support the fishery through to certification.

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Ben Tre clam fishery, Vietnam. The fishery was provided support to form a co-operative alliance to reduce illegal fishing activity

above is a route that has been used to help address this particular constraint.

An example of such a partnership is demonstrated in the Ben Tre clam fishery of Vietnam. The partnership involved WWF Vietnam, the Fishery Department and a bilateral partner working with participants in the fishery. WWF provided technical advice to help improve management in the fishery. The fishery was provided support by the partners to form a co-operative alliance to reduce illegal fishing activity and to strengthen the fishery's representation on the trading front. They were also supported in efforts to improve data collection. In another example, the Gambia sole fishery is being supported by the WWF West Africa Marine Ecoregion programme, in partnership with the Atlantic Seafood company, to address issues identified in an assessment of the fishery, with the aim of proceeding to a full assessment in due course. In Indonesia, stakeholders in the blue swimming crab fishery are working in a partnership with SFP, using the MSC pre-assessment process as a framework to address sustainability issues. In another example, the US-based Phillips Foods is working with other stakeholders towards certification of the blue swimming crab fishery in the Philippines. This is being effected by undertaking an MSC pre-assessment that is being used as the basis for developing a fishery improvement plan. The partnership, which involves the private sector, NGOs and other key stakeholders in the fishery, has identified improved regulatory framework, establishment of a commission to support research, education and conservation, and establishing a resource management fund as the next key steps for improvement in the fishery.

### Ecolabelling

The key draw to certification and ecolabelling is that it provides a win-win situation in which there are benefits for the environment as well as for stakeholders associated with the fishery. Benefits of certification include ecological improvements such as reduction in bycatch, improved data


The approach in these partnerships often involves using a pre-assessment to identify aspects of the fishery needing improvements, followed by identification and agreement on the activities that are needed to address these issues. The fisheries are then supported by these partners to implement identified activities, following which the fishery can then apply for full assessment. The partnership arrangements often involve fisheries working with NGOs, commercial organizations, government organizations and funders who provide support for the development and implementation of action plans to help the fisheries meet requirements for certification.

Weak management systems have been identified as a particular constraint to certification for many developing-country and small-scale fisheries, and can often mean that these fisheries may not meet the requirements necessary for them to get certified. The approach described

collection, improved research, better management of target stocks, and policy changes in support of sustainable fisheries. Other benefits from MSC certification have socioeconomic impacts. These include access of fishery products to new markets, premium prices on products, improved supplier status for fishers, investments and other social benefits.

These benefits occur both in developed- and developing-country fisheries. In Mexico, the certification of the Baja California lobster fishery and the accompanying recognition of the sustainable practices of the fishers led to the communities becoming more empowered, and also led to an investment in social infrastructure by the government worth over US\$20mn. In Vietnam, certification of the Ben Tre clam fishery has led to more market opportunities for the fishery and a 25-30 per cent increase in product price. In Australia, the small-scale Lakes and Coorong fishery claims to regularly command premiums of 30 to 50 per cent for MSC-certified versus non-certified seafood sold in restaurants in Sydney and Melbourne, while the North Eastern Sea Fisheries Committee sea bass fishery in the UK has reported premiums of up to 25 per cent, compared to local values, when selling to restaurants.

The MSC standard is primarily an ecological standard. The standard, however, includes requirements which, in addition to the market benefits mentioned above, have important social impacts for fishers associated with certified fisheries. One of the requirements for certification is the presence of a framework that ensures that rights created explicitly or established by custom of people dependent on fishing for food and livelihoods, are addressed. There are also requirements for management systems to include recourse to appropriate dispute resolution frameworks for stakeholders, as well as requirements for an effective consultation process that ensures that the fishery management system is open and participatory to all interested parties, including fishers.

To conclude, sustainable seafood sourcing is becoming increasingly mainstream practice. This trend has positive implications for livelihoods, food security and ecological sustainability in small-scale and developing-country fisheries. In order for these fisheries to benefit from the practice of bringing sustainability into the marketplace, ecolabelling must be bound by a framework of equity, transparency, accessibility and credibility. These principles underpin the work undertaken by the MSC to address issues that potentially limit participation from developing-country and small-scale fisheries. Ongoing implementation will ensure that many more of these fisheries are able to benefit from the MSC's certification and ecolabelling programme. 

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#### For more

[www.msc.org](http://www.msc.org)

**Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)**

[www.sustainablefish.org](http://www.sustainablefish.org)

**Sustainable Fisheries Partnership**

[www.worldwildlife.org/](http://www.worldwildlife.org/)

[what/globalmarkets/fishing/](http://what/globalmarkets/fishing/)

[communityfisheriesprogram.html](http://communityfisheriesprogram.html)

**WWF Community Fisheries Program**